1.) A Desire Named Streetcar

In New Orleans, Louisiana, there is no streetcar named Desire. There is still a Desire Street, and it still has a public transportation system – there are even streetcars that glide elegantly along steel rails perched in well-trimmed grassy medians in that city, but there is no streetcar named Desire to adorn that street as today it is a bus line. How did this happen? The most famous streetcar in the country that made streetcars the icon they once were is a bus route now. Surely tourists alone could have sustained this trolley line, on account of its famous route name, but alas, there are only rubber tires on this iconic route, and this is in a city known for its streetcars.

Trolley Problems

Cities that retained even a handful of their trolley systems, trams for you European readers, are all iconic tourist magnets in the United States. Tourists from all around the world, and moreover, elsewhere on the North American continent, flock to pay a few dollars to ride PCC streetcars built in the 1930s along Market Street in San Francisco, where the iconic Key System, destroyed by a white-collar criminal conspiracy, was replaced by the contemporary BART train's trans-bay tube and broad gauge, fully automated, very expensive system.

Few could imagine the San Francisco Bay Area without the BART, or its beloved CalTrain, yet that post-apocalyptic vision – averted there only in part, to some extent thanks to the undeniably prophetic vision of an eccentric homeless man known as Emperor Norton, who in the late 1800s ordered the construction of the marvelous trans-bay tube that lies there today.

This is not a story about Emperor Norton, but that is a story worth knowing so I would advise visitors to the Bay Area to take the 'Emperor Norton Tour' if available still. He actually was the first to envision the thing.

Many of us have fond memories of the Mr. Rogers television program from childhood. I certainly do. Those of us who do will recall that in Mr. Roger's neighborhood, the trolley car was in fact a character on the show, not unlike 'Thomas the Tank Engine' and not a mere set piece.

I believe this was no accident. I believe Mr. Rogers intended that narrative device to serve as a message to future generations that a layer of the nation's character had been lost when we forsake the humble trolley car as our means of transportation. He is no longer with us to ask, but there is some evidence to support that his love of trolleys was more than whimsical.

And few of us today, apart from a few old-timers and the lucky residents of cities with preserved transit, can remember, apart from a few precious museums here and there, that the country indeed, the entire country (at least the inhabited bits) of the United States, and indeed the Americas as a whole, were once a paradise of equitable, accessible transportation. From across Latin America to the Canadian suburbs and back to Washington D.C., the entire United States and its neighborhood looked a lot more like Mr. Roger's neighborhood than they do today.

Which brings us to D.C. and Mayor Muriel Bowser.

2.) Save The D.C. Streetcar

What I set out to write is a little different than what you are reading, because my intentions are what guided this book. See, I intended to write a detailed history of my local trolley system in Western Massachusetts, a system unfinished known as the Massachusetts Consolidated Railways which went belly up after a series of devastating fires in the 19-teens and was partially continued under municipal ownership, and partially abandoned, then fully abandoned during the Depression, at least partly as the result of a handful of oil and auto industry insiders and gas station owners ascending to local government leadership, who unsurprisingly permanently severed the tracks at the first sign of unprofitability after years of well-regarded useful service. The motorization trend would only continue.

However, as I spiraled into the tunnel of obsessive research I find myself inexplicably comfortable in, I found that the deeper into the weeds I got, the more difficult a lift it seemed to get the most important points across that I wanted to make.

See, history is only entertainment if you cannot connect it to what is happening today, and as the pile of newspaper articles and state reports I found myself in deepened, that seemed to be growing increasingly the case.

The story of the American streetcar is a story that is local, everywhere, which sounds like an oxymoron. There's a reason gangbangers in L.A. ask people first where they're from. Local experiences do differ somewhat depending on where you are. But as the wise will recognize, it is in equal or greater measure that those experiences are the same, and it is to that sameness that is a more fruitful quest for those seeking truth and moreover, a path forward for a country that in many ways, seems broken and rundown to many of us living in it.

But as a wise teacher of mine would say, this country has good bones.

Not far from my Uncle's house in Washington D.C., there is a gorge with an old wooden trestle crossing through it. The trestle, dating back perhaps to the Civil War era, marks a subtle path that winds through Georgetown, ironically named for the mad king and not the president, which few realize. Those tracks through the still-cobbled streets of that desirable walkable neighborhood enjoyed by the Washingtonian elite, mostly, lead to a grassy level pathway via that wooden trestle. The trestle itself, of course, has rotted beyond repair and is fenced off and possibly even gone now as I most recently visited the area some years ago, but nonetheless, the mostly intact ghost of a former D.C. streetcar line lies there waiting to be awakened, or, carved up and obliterated for profit by real estate developers, as many have been.

Meanwhile, across town, a living streetcar is on the chopping block, and by the time you read this, may have been condemned to oblivion. This was an Obama-era effort at a cost of several hundred million dollars to revive the early 20th century streetcar system that once connected the aboveground world of U.S. politics to its surrounding community. Today the D.C. Metro, an outstanding and modern system in

its own right, connects the city underground, and is rightly beloved for its efficiency and speed. But is there not a place for aboveground light rail in the sunshine above? Why has the current Mayor of Washington, D.C. placed the city's first streetcar in half a century on death row?

If there is one conspiracy that definitely happened, you may be surprised to know that it is the one best known from the animated classic 'Who Framed Roger Rabbit?', but this conspiracy actually happened, if any of them did. It was prosecuted in court and the defendants; a cartel of oil and auto companies still exist today, and to the extent that anybody does, this cartel rules the world.

They decide when the United States is going to war (whenever the fuel lines are threatened) and when it gets to be at peace. And this cartel is primarily why American transportation is more bones than body these days. Freight railways without passenger service. Abandoned vacant lots at the end of roads named Depot Street; the more I have seen of this country, the more I have seen the same shit everywhere, if you'll pardon the expression.

I have no evidence that the oil and gas industry is behind the looming fate of the D.C. Streetcar, and you will find plenty of infighting among so-called new urbanists as to the efficacy and efficiency of streetcars compared to heavier rail alternatives, arguments to which I don't entirely disagree, but it is certainly the fault of this cartel that the urban, suburban, and even rural environments that were once graced by streetcars have become inhospitable to the vessels to which many of them owe their very existence, such as the proverbial streetcar suburbs which surround literally every American city of any size.

Another impact of this colossal loss, as I have come to see it; that being the loss of streetcar systems as a whole across practically the entire continent, is the present dichotomy of urban vs. rural culture.

Many of the most contentious recent political divisions in the United States, and indeed Canada and probably Mexico as well, have been marked by a distinct division between the thoughts, cultures, and ways of life associated with urban life as opposed to rural existence, with suburbs being caught somewhere in between depending on the distance of their orbits.

I would contend that this is not an invariable state of American culture (and when I say American, I mean the Americas; there is more shared history and culture than not in my view) but rather a more recent diversion following a period of more harmonious existence between urban and rural residents.

Urban life is undoubtedly, especially today, far different in pace and diversity of experience than ever before, but does that make urban dwellers fundamentally different than rural dwellers? I don't know for sure. Of course, people from certain regions will have certain accents and tastes related to their cultural background, but is that a recipe for disagreement with their rural peers?

I don't think that is necessarily inevitable. Why?

The primary source of disagreement and disagreeability between peer cultures and groups (in the tribalist sense of the word) is truly, as demonstrated by several German studies on the topic, the most obvious of obviousnesses; unfamiliarity.

People distrust those they don't know, implicitly. This is just biology, and the way humans evolved. It's a design flaw, but not really, since it has gotten us this far without being eaten by lions or killed in some out-group's cult ritual. (A joke, sort of.)

But basically, the theft of the humble electric avenues that formerly connected urban, suburban, and rural areas together, the neighborhood trolleys, is in my view the primary source of disagreement in the United States, albeit indirectly.

Of course, most people are not arguing about trolleys on Reddit or Facebook. People are talking about contemporary issues like ICE ripping families apart and caging children while other, evidently sick people cheer on the Nuremberg rerun as fascism is normalized.

But what set the stage for this dreary turn of events in America? We were separated from one another, and over a period of decades, we forgot that we were living in the same, bad neighborhood.

3.) What even is a bad neighborhood?

What actually is a bad neighborhood? And how and why has America become one?

Simply put, a bad neighborhood is just an unfamiliar, blighted, or dangerous one.
To me, this America is not familiar. It is and it isn't. For example, the America I grew up in and learned about in school appears to be fractured beyond recognition, but I would argue, not beyond repair. We'll get to that.

It is certainly blighted. Every major city has massive gashes cut through it by the likes of Robert Moses. Freeway trench divisions cutting cities like Springfield, Massachusetts, and Hartford, Connecticut, off from their most valuable waterfront real estate, stunting their economic development by decades.

Springfield especially has suffered from this terrible American severance as it lost also its main source of employment prior to the Depression, which was as a major manufacturer of—you guessed it, trolleys.

And as we will see, an unseen victim of what has become known as the National City Lines conspiracy, a conspiracy far realer and more broad-reaching than has previously been understood.

A debt of gratitude is owed to the Springfield Republican and author Edwin Black for their reporting on this subject, without which I could not have drawn the conclusions I have with certainty, and a bibliography, if not inline citations, will be provided at the end of this book for curious researchers.

Pictured; On the Chopping Block. (Image via Wikipedia)

4. But wait, the D.C. Streetcar!

Happening right now, the D.C. Streetcar is poised to be, like literally tens of thousands before it, be euphemistically motorized and replaced with “enhanced” bus service.

But buses aren’t bad, right?

Of course not, but in a way, buses represent the ghosts of America’s former glory. In many areas, such as my home of Franklin County, Massachusetts, the public buses trace almost exactly the same routes as the fallen streetcars once did. In my area, they are even free. But they are ghosts.

Ghosts packed into traffic with their executioners, the cult of the automobile.

Now don’t get me wrong. I love driving a fast American muscle car through Malibu Canyon as much as the next guy or gal. But a joyride does not make for a comprehensive path to a better future, such as we

need. And most automotive trips these days, especially for urban dwellers but for us in the sticks too, are a fairly joyless experience, at least in my view.

I find myself drowsily plodding along the turnpike listening to music but unable to look at the passing scenery in scenic western New England for more than a second or two at a time. I find myself pining for the moment I will arrive home and be able to put my feet up and actually relax, and increasingly having my groceries and other necessities delivered to my home to avoid the repetitive slog of running distant rural errands, which no doubt is collectively a trend causing some injury to the rural shopkeepers of America.

Be it far-flung rural errands or stop-and-go urban commuter misery, something is terribly wrong with the way we are going about our lives in this country, and most of us have only a sense of general unhappiness to inform them of it, one that is more often than not addressed only with medication rather than any bonafide effort to improve a person's material conditions.

For the people that live and work along the D.C. Streetcar corridor, the trolley's presence did exactly that. Exactly what it was supposed to, in fact.

Workers didn't have to worry about parking meters and tow trucks. The visibility and frequency of the service increased sales at adjacent shops, as more shoppers had less of a hassle visiting adjacent businesses. And the seemingly inevitable gentrification began to occur.

5. The Problem of Gentrification

The problem with improving a community is that once a community is improved, people from outside that community with wealth begin to desire living there. This has happened everywhere that any community has been improved ever.

So how to address the obvious scourge of displacement that goes along with increasing the value of a community to outsiders? Do we simply leave so-called blighted areas alone (such as the 'Urban Renewal' of the 1960s probably should have) so they remain affordable?

I would say good policy is the answer here. I think that gentrification is probably one of the leading causes of the general dissatisfaction with the D.C. Streetcar, and rightly so, to some extent. People have little use for excellent, comfortable transportation into a neighborhood that is now exactly three times as expensive to live in as they can afford. Bitterness ensues.

What needs to be done is that the value added to neighborhoods as they are, unarguably, improved, must be captured and reinvested into two things.

First, capital gains from property value increased and other windfalls associated with gentrification must be taxed and distributed directly to subsidizing the non-land-owning class of residents of the affected neighborhood. This allows the neighborhood to retain valuable cultural elements and is best done in the most direct fashion possible; rent subsidies, public housing, and possibly even direct payments to long-time residents whose expenses are affected. The fewer intermediaries, the better, as this eliminates the amount of funding lost in unnecessary bureaucratic procedures and distributed directly to residents.

It cannot be said that a rising tide raises all ships unless residents who rent are given some meaningful equity in the places they live, full stop.

Next, whatever value taxed that remains must be RE-invested in expanding the improvements made to the neighborhood TO THE SURROUNDING ones. This decreases the imbalance between neighboring communities that incentivizes unsustainable pressure on housing and so forth. By continually expanding transit networks to adjacent populations (until there are no unserved populations remaining), the pressure on housing diffuses throughout a city and its suburbs.

Okay, so while we have not solved gentrification altogether, we have mitigated it significantly, and along with other measures others have proposed, it can be fully addressed, at least in theory.

6. So what about the rural?

Rural areas suffer from an abundance of transportation-related expenses. Commutes to work are longer than elsewhere. Driving to get groceries, getting to school, and other necessary day trips are often far-flung, as these communities have deteriorated at a planning level as a result of the unhealthy (and factually incorrect) assumption that all residents can comfortably afford an automobile.

This assumption has been carefully cultivated over many years by the oil cartel and has profited it immensely. Almost certainly, those reading this will have their pay docked for automotive expenses in one way or another, be it the cost of insurance, gas, or paying an arm and a leg for non-union taxi services like Uber and Lyft. I know when I'm being fleeced, and so do you.

It didn't used to be this way. It doesn't matter if you live in South Carolina, New Hampshire, or Montana. There used to be a way to get all your errands and work commute done for about a nickel each way.

In a way, it doesn't matter as much that this way of life was destroyed by a criminal conspiracy spearheaded by the same culprits as the Iraqi and now Iranian wars, Chevron, Phillips, BP, and the Oil Sheiks, as much as it matters we recognize that the crime occurred.

By rebuilding the connections between urban and rural, bringing back the trolleys, and fully funding Amtrak and building new intercity rail connections with federal money, the enemy will die on its own.

Trolley Problems

By healing ourselves, we vanquish our enemy. This, my friend, is the path to American greatness and one of shared prosperity with our neighbors, rather than fear, contempt, and dehumanization.

A trolley car once connected the cities of El Paso, Texas, and Juárez, Mexico, and the Vermonter was once the Montrealer. An impossible railroad knitted together Tijuana and San Diego.

Apparently, as German-American railroad tycoon John D. Spreckels proved, that railroad wasn't so impossible after all. It still lies there, dormant, out of service, but intact.

And in the refrain of a favorite teacher of mine: Good Bones. This country has good bones.

Alas, apparently $10 Million a year was too much for the nation's capital. I dare you to look up how much the district spends on road maintenance for comparison, but by the time you read this, D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser's administration will almost certainly have killed Washington D.C.'s only streetcar.

One passenger sadly told WTOP News "If we had extended that car, it would be so easy for people to come in and not have to park in zoned neighborhoods, visit a restaurant and leave, I will miss the people on the streetcars." A friend chimed in "We met on the streetcar. We just talk and there's a lot of conversation among us riders". The owner of a Bed and Breakfast along the route added that they had already had some guests cancel their stays as a result of the streetcar's looming closure under Bowser.

You can give the aptly named Mayor a piece of your mind at (202) 727-2643.